

Public Waldorf Education in the United States

BY BETTY K. STALEY, MA

Emil Molt, owner/director of the Waldorf-Astoria cigarette factory, established the first Waldorf school in Stuttgart, Germany, in 1919 with Rudolf Steiner as director. Steiner negotiated that the school would be available to all children, regardless of ability to pay. At the same time, teachers would be free from state control in methods and curriculum. Since then, Waldorf schools have opened around the world, with arrangements for government funding and control varying according to country. However, in the United States, since the first Waldorf school was founded in New York City in 1928, all Waldorf schools have, until the 1990s, been private or independent, i.e., functioning without government funding.

Urban Waldorf School, Milwaukee— An Experiment

In 1991 Dr. Robert Peterkin, superintendent of schools in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, requested the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America (AWSNA) to establish the first Waldorf school within a public school district. AWSNA asked me, Western Regional Chair of AWSNA at the time, to form a committee and explore the possibility of a public Waldorf school serving inner-city children in Milwaukee. The committee included Temba Sadiki (a.k.a. Keith Jefferson), Frances Vig, Connie Stokes (Starzinski), and Henry Barnes.

The school board authorized the school, a few experienced Waldorf teachers and Milwaukee public school

teachers joined the faculty, and Dorothy St. Charles—who was to prove to be a tireless warrior on behalf of the school, protecting and strengthening it—became principal. Ann Pratt, experienced Waldorf teacher and trainer of teachers, moved to Milwaukee as the “implementer,” doing weekly training sessions and mentoring the teachers. Mary Ruud, Mark and Laura Birdsall, Linda Williams, and others shared their Waldorf experience and expertise with the Milwaukee faculty.

Mark Birdsall wrote:

The experience at Urban Waldorf School (UWS) was life-changing for many of us involved in it—teachers as well as students. . . . Real education has to be built on understanding and trust, and the first few years at UWS were largely about creating those—teachers learning to understand what we were seeing in the students, children learning that they could rely on the teachers to be there for them in a myriad of ways that went far beyond the classroom walls, parents learning to understand this different approach to education and to trust these teachers with their children year after year, teachers of both races learning to understand where the other was coming from and put aside the mistrust unavoidable in America.

The students knew that they had a special home in the school. . . . Life might be tough—bullets flying in your hood and dangers lurking on the way to school—but when you came through the front door you were safe and nurtured and you could let down your defenses and be a child again. The continued feedback twenty years later, at school reunions and on Facebook, confirms that it changed their lives in many ways.

In 1994 Dr. Ray McDermott, professor of education and anthropology at Stanford University, with a team of educators, visited the school, which at that time had 343 children. After the visit, McDermott reported:



Dorothy St. Charles, principal, and Ann Pratt, teacher trainer and mentor, Urban Waldorf School, Milwaukee, ca. 1994



Class teacher Laura Birdsall with her third-grade class at Urban Waldorf School, Milwaukee, 1995–96 school year

Despite the difficult environment that surrounds Urban Waldorf School and some of the children in their daily lives, life inside the school is safe, quiet, well-ordered, and, in terms of relationships, warm. . . . The school has extraordinary leadership in the principal's office, hardworking and concerned teachers, and a good esprit de corps. In 1992 the school ranked among the lowest in Milwaukee. In 1995 sixty-three percent of the children were above the district's standard for their grade levels. This has happened despite the fact that the school does not stress the early acquisition of reading skills nor the early development of test-taking skills. . . . The school emphasizes not just cognitive learning but also development of character as preparation for taking one's place as an educated citizen. . . . There is reason for everyone in the school to be proud and for everyone in American education to be hopeful.

With changes in administration and faculty, the experiment ended after ten years. Despite this, Urban Waldorf School in Milwaukee contributed to future possibilities of Waldorf Education within an urban public school district. Two other initiatives that had short-lived histories were Harriet Tubman Village School in San Diego and Westside Community School in New York City.

The Experiment Continues in Sacramento

In 1993 Dr. Rudi Crew, superintendent of schools in Sacramento, California, asked Rudolf Steiner College for help establishing a similar type of school as in Milwaukee. Local public school teachers, led by Katherine Lehman, faculty members from Sacramento Waldorf School and Rudolf Steiner College, and a committee from Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD) created two summer schools—for children—using Waldorf methods. These schools provided opportunities for district teachers to gain experience in the Waldorf approach. The success of the summer programs led to the establishment of a magnet school using Waldorf practices. The school went through three sites and changes of name: Oak Ridge, John Morse, and now Alice Birney, weathering many challenges.

Through a passionate and committed group of teachers and administrators, a supportive school superintendent, school district assistance in meeting legal challenges, and acknowledgment and support from alumni parents of local Waldorf schools, the school outgrew its site and moved to its present campus as Alice Birney Elementary School. Now twenty-five years old, it is a thriving school with over four hundred children, double-tracked from transitional kindergarten through eighth grade.

In 2015 the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education (SCOPE) studied the practices and outcomes of Alice Birney. It reported:

At Alice Birney, the Waldorf-inspired approach differs from many other public schools in the extent to which Birney extends its focus beyond providing students with specific knowledge and skills to prepare them for college and career, to also preparing children for meaningful lives in the broadest sense by developing them for physically, socially, artistically, and cognitively meaningful engagement with the world.



A proud second-grade knitter, Urban Waldorf School, Milwaukee, ca. 1992

A second difference is the extent to which Rudolf Steiner's, the founder of Waldorf schools, theory of child development and goals for nurturing human development inform every aspect of how children experience school including the curriculum, pedagogy, and structure of school. . . . It is striking to see such an approach supported and promoted within the context of a school district. Alice Birney was able to achieve fidelity to the Waldorf approach because SCUSD granted them decision-making control—although often hard fought for—over curriculum,



Snack time in the kindergarten at Alice Birney Elementary School, Sacramento, California



May Faire chorus at Yuba River Charter School, Grass Valley, California

assessment, and staffing decisions. That fidelity to a cohesive and holistic approach in turn led to high levels of student and parent satisfaction, demand for the school, and strong student outcomes. . . .

While strong for all students, student outcomes are particularly strong for African American, Latino, and socioeconomically disadvantaged students.

Two additional schools in the Public Waldorf movement have opened in Sacramento: George Washington Carver School of Arts and Science, led by Dr. Allegra Alessandri, serving a very diverse student body; and A.M. Winn Public Waldorf Elementary School.

Charter Schools in California

In 1992 the California legislature mandated the establishment of one hundred charter schools, free in their choice of educational philosophy, governance procedures, and admissions criteria. Although charter schools receive state education funds for each child, they must supply their own facilities.

In 1994 after the independent Mariposa Waldorf School had closed, parents and teachers working with George Hoeffcker—a teacher at the independent Live Oak Waldorf School in Meadow Vista—formed Yuba River Charter School (YRCS) in Grass Valley, the first public charter school guided by the principles of Public Waldorf Education. By 1997 the school had kindergarten through eighth grade with two hundred students. In 2008 it received a grant of \$8.5 million to build a new school facility.

During this period, parents and teachers from San Francisco north to the Sierra mountains formed seven charter elementary schools: Novato Charter, Golden Valley River, Golden Valley Orchard, Stone Bridge, Woodland Star, Sebastopol Independent Charter, and Sun Ridge Charter, as well as the Community School for Creative Education, pioneered by Dr. Ida Oberman,

serving a very diverse population in Oakland. More recently, charter schools also opened in the southern part of the state.

In 2011 Credo High School was founded as a high school working out of Public Waldorf principles, with Chip Romer as principal and Thom Schaefer as education director. The school, located in Rohnert Park, north of San Francisco, now has over four hundred students, half from the local elementary charter schools in the Public Waldorf movement and the rest from other elementary schools.

Waldorf Education in Arizona and Elsewhere

In 1991 the Arizona Council for Waldorf Education (ACWE) was founded to support Waldorf Education, respecting the needs of each community. Several independent Waldorf schools began, but as Joan Treadaway, president of ACWE said:

The communities wanted Waldorf Education desperately; they saw the need, felt the commitment, but knew they could not be sustained. They wanted Waldorf Education for all children, and private schools would not survive in the small communities.

When Arizona passed charter legislation in 1994, the independent Waldorf schools struggled; ultimately four decided to become charter schools. At present, there are two independent schools (Tucson Waldorf School and Running River School in Sedona) and five charter schools (Desert Marigold, Desert Sky Community School, Pine Forest, Desert Star, and Mountain Oak).



Students at Community School for Creative Education in Oakland, California, with their collection of handmade yarn butterflies

In recent years, charter schools in the Public Waldorf movement have opened in Washington, Oregon, Alaska, Colorado, Utah, Idaho, Hawaii, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Wisconsin, and Florida. In total, there are currently fifty public schools working with the principles of Public Waldorf Education, including twenty-seven in California. The best estimate of total enrollment is over twelve thousand children in kindergarten through eighth grade. When a public school is accepted as a full member of the Alliance for Public Waldorf Education (APWE), it can officially be called a “Public Waldorf” school. Several schools have engaged in the self-study process, and two schools have been designated as Public Waldorf schools.

Challenges from Outside the Waldorf Movement

In the 1990s, with the opening of charter schools and the introduction of the internet, Waldorf Education in public schools attracted attention. George Hoffercker, principal of Yuba River Charter School, was contacted by People for Legal and Nonsectarian Schools (PLANS). The group filed a lawsuit against the two authorizers of the school—Twin Ridges Elementary School District and Sacramento City Unified School District. PLANS, led by two disaffected former Waldorf parents, stated that Waldorf schools promote religion and do not belong in the public sector. Over the next years, PLANS tried to stop the opening of public schools in the Waldorf movement. However, in 2010 the lawsuit was settled in favor of the school districts, and they received a \$1,000,000 settlement for legal defense costs. The issue of Anthroposophy, the underlying philosophy behind the Waldorf understanding of child development, was brought up in the trial and was dismissed, because the Anthroposophical Society in America states in its bylaws that it is not a religion; membership is open to everyone regardless of religion, race, nationality, social standing, and scientific or artistic conviction.

Challenges Within the Waldorf Movement: AWSNA's Response

In order to explore the question of Waldorf Education in the public sector, AWSNA established the Public School Task Force in the early 1990s. A public school could be recognized as “Waldorf-inspired” when eighty percent of its teachers had completed an approved Waldorf certificate program. But, in 1996 AWSNA issued a formal position statement about possible membership in the Association:

We will not include public school initiatives in AWSNA, being clear we are an association of independent schools.

In part, this was due to concern about certain compromises that public programs typically have to make because of their dependence on government funding. These include adhering to state curricular standards, administering periodic standardized tests to the children, requiring that teachers have a standard state certification, and not using the word “God” in the morning verse.

Alliance for Public Waldorf Education

In 2002–3 leaders of AWSNA encouraged George Hoffercker to form an alliance of the public schools so they could keep abreast of the PLANS lawsuit, share

their experiences, and represent the Public Waldorf movement in conversations with AWSNA. In February 2006, with Chip Romer as director, the Alliance for Public Waldorf Education was founded to promote and support the development of Public Waldorf Education. Individuals committed to its mission over the past decades include Will Stapp, Bonnie River, Caleb Buckley, Chip Romer, and others. Currently led by President Liz Beaven, active members include Rainbow Rosenbloom, Chamomile Nunz, Charlie Burkham, Hellene Brodsky Blake, Cassandra Bridge, Jeff Lough, and Mary Ruud.

Although there have been difficult years in the relationship between the Alliance for Public Waldorf Education and the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America, individual teachers continued to nurture relationships with each other as they shared their mutual concerns about children's needs. Over time, the two organizations have made progress in trusting each other, recognizing their shared goals, and working collaboratively.

In the past four years, APWE and AWSNA, and more recently the Waldorf Early Childhood Association of North America (WECAN), have made joint statements committing to working together out of the insights of Rudolf Steiner. In addition, several collaborative efforts are active, including the June 2020 conference at Chicago Waldorf School celebrating 100 years of education—*Learn to Change the World: Education Innovation Summit*.

The development of the Public Waldorf movement continues to offer a healthy choice to parents and children within American education. Rudolf Steiner's indications are alive and well 100 years later. ◊



BETTY STALEY has been a Waldorf teacher and adult educator for over fifty years. She was at Sacramento Waldorf School for twenty-seven years as a class teacher, handwork teacher, and high school history and English teacher.

A founder of Rudolf Steiner College in Fair Oaks, California, she directed the Waldorf High School Teacher Education Program there and helped found a number of Waldorf high schools. She has been involved in the founding and development of Public Waldorf Education since 1991. She consults with schools—public and private—and is an international lecturer on Waldorf Education, adolescence, and parenting. She is the author of eight books, her latest being *Tending the Spark, Meeting the Middle School Child*.